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Theme 7 - Theoretical and methodological issues in researching childhood and children's lives

**CONCEPTUAL, METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES IN CHILDREN'S RESEARCH
IN PORTUGAL**

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Abstract:

Methodological issues in research with children have sparked a growing interest by the Sociology of Childhood since the last decades. In Portugal, this interest is more recent, but it has had a significant increase. Considering several researches, namely master thesis, supervised by the authors on the framework of Sociology of Childhood, this proposal intends to characterize some methodological complexities in research with children in Portugal, when we consider their voice and agency in the knowledge producing about them.

The goal of this paper is to contribute to the methodological discussion on research with children through the identification of a set of challenges related to: (i) the diversity of methodologies uses in children's research, (ii) ethical concerns and (iii) the role of the researcher.

Keywords: Methodological and Ethical complexities; Sociology of Childhood; Academic research in Portugal.

Introduction

In research on childhood and children we have seen in recent decades, a movement of epistemological and methodological break with the positivist tradition, which considers children as objects of research, imposes the quantitative methods as its ideal of objectivity, neutrality and defends a vertical relationship between researchers and researched.

This counter-hegemonic movement has found in the sociology of childhood and child studies the foundations of a new paradigm and new directions in research with children. We defend the assumption that children should be considered as research subjects and participants, thus considering this way, their views, experiences and perspectives.

Another important assumption which has gained greater visibility in academia is the ethical dimension in research with children. It is not just an academic endeavour; it takes also a social and global dimension, considering that the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which Portugal has ratified in 1990, and specifically by the provisions of Articles 12 and 13, defends children participation. As stated Kjørholt "“this is a huge theme, implying not only identification of significant objectives to be researched within the range of analysis of children and childhood in a global world, but also choices to be made related to theoretical perspectives, as well as methodological approaches.” (2005:1)

At the academy there are also a number of authors (Alderson, 1995, 2000, Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Alderson & Morrow, 2003, 2011, Christensen 2002, Christensen & Prout, 2002; Laws and Mann, 2004; Cocks 2006) that have been working the issues of research with children, giving them an important role in the characterization of their life worlds, assuming thus an important place in social theorizing about childhood.

They identify some principles that help the adult-researcher in the research with children, including considering children as competent social agents, as producers of their own culture, with their own ways of interpreting the world, of acting, thinking



and feeling; able to speak about their actions and to represent them in different ways (multiple languages), children are there studied by what they are and do rather than for what they aren't or still can't do.

In this regard Gallacher & Gallagher (2008) argue that the political and ethical arguments are significant and these support the right of children to participate in research, namely arguments about the epistemological advantages. Some of them relate with the fact that this way could be a better way to produce more significant knowledge; it could be a better way to access and enhance previously neglected knowledge or to allow a better understanding of complex social phenomena (Kesby, 2000), and, finally, to produce more authentic knowledge about the subjective realities of children.

The same authors also defend that "the identity produces knowledge. According to this premise people who have a certain identity are in a better position to produce knowledge about others with a similar identity." (*idem* 4), and, therefore, it's unquestionable that children, as experts of their social worlds and cultural, are more likely to help adults understand the meanings they attach to their actions, relationships, feelings, etc.

In Portugal, this movement has had a significant dynamic in the last two decades. Due to the contributions of the sociology of childhood we have witnessed to a renewed and growing concern about the methodological, ethical and epistemological issues in the research with children (Ferreira, 2002; Soares et al. 2005; Soares, 2006; Ferreira & Sarmiento, 2008; Tomás, 2007, 2008; Sarmiento, 2008; Fernandes, 2009).

This development has been sustained with a considerable amount of research conducted as part of masters and PhD theses, which in general have focused on the production of knowledge about the specificities of children, their skills in the development of research dynamics with and about them.

This effort has required the questioning and reflection about the ways children understand the world, which are different from adults, and requires from researchers

a significant methodological imagination and a reflective, permanent and cautious process.

Along this path some theoretical and methodological questions have been raised which reveal some complexity, namely, related to the enigmatic nature of the child or their familiar weirdness. On the one hand, if we all think that we know what being a child is all about, when we engage in research processes with the child, we discover perplexities about their skills, pictures of the reality, ways of being, that tell us that our ideas about children cannot be flat or linear, because the worlds of childhood are complex and plural; they cannot be hermetic or standardized, because the cognitive, social, cultural and emotional needs of children are diverse and heterogeneous. In short, they cannot be taken for granted, requiring a permanent methodological prudence in order to adapt the processes of research to children, their context and the researcher.

In our opinion, it is essential to avoid false linearities, highlighting and addressing the complexities of relations between all actors involved in the research process, which should be considered as "an open field of experience" (Pais, 2008: 242) and a process of permanent reflexivity.

Aware of these potentialities and constraints we propose to expand this reflection from the analysis of twelve master's theses supervised by the authors, between 2008 and 2011, from three axes of analysis: the diversity of methodologies used in research with children, the ethical issues arisen from research, and, finally, the role of adults and children in the research process.

Methodological note

In order to achieve the goals we have set, we have decided to select master thesis supervised by the authors between 2008 and 2011. It was felt that this choice would allow us to characterize research processes, focusing on the three axes of analysis considered. Similarly, we think that this way we can create a body of indicators and

analysis of the theses that will stimulate a reflection on the knowledge produced about and with children.

It is neither the objective nor our desirable to establish a general theory that accounts for, in general, all the methodologies and strategies undertaken in children’s research. It is only necessary to create conditions to detect what is common and different among different subjects, methodologies and ethics strategies adopted in the thesis analyzed to thereby identify the points and modes of articulation between them without each losing its specificity.

Boyden and Ennew (1997) reported that an investigation that sees children’s participation the ethical principles that influence it should not be previously established but rather considered in a continuous construction process, given the characteristics of children. This is precisely what we will do: identify the issues, contexts and child characteristics (age) examined in the theses, as it can be seen in the following table.

Table 1 - Themes, Contexts and Children (age)

Themes	Contexts	Children’s age
Childhood and Disability (3 thesis)	Public school Public school Therapy centre	6-13 11-14 7-12
Childhood and learning	Public school	14
Childhood and environmental rights	Public school	11
Childhood and participation	Centre of leisure activities	6-11
Childhood, protection and participation	Local commission to protect childhood and Youth	7-11
Childhood and peer relations	Kindergarten	3-5
Childhood and family rights	Kindergarten	3-6
Childhood, institutionalization and family rights	Residential care institution	4-10
Childhood and exclusion contexts	Public school /deprived neighbour	9-15
Childhood and media	Kindergarten	3-5

N=12

A brief characterization of the children with whom the research was developed the research indicates that there is a great heterogeneity in age ranging from 3 years to 15 years. Most research was conducted in public schools. It is important to underline the fact that most teachers are researchers who developed the research work in their places of work, which, as we shall see, put some ethical and methodological challenges.

The diversity of methodologies in children's research

At the beginning of this century we still see predominant epistemological conceptions which hide children's interpretations about the knowledge production about them. This mainstream guidance considers research strategies experimental or quasi-experimental, using hypothetical-deductive guidelines, which lead to the "laboratorization" of children's worlds and their transformation in *guinea pig*, or research that wants to understand childhood from the statistical point of view, conducted under the parameters that result from the working hypotheses of scientists and undervalue the interpretations of social actors (Soares *et al.*, 2006). Nevertheless, this approach has been confronted by other views on how to study the children, including the rejection, by the sociology of childhood, of a passive and minority status of children, proposing from a the methodological point of view, to consider what they say or do relevant to the research.

As we stated earlier, we also witness to the defence of the child as social actor in the research processes that concern them, and therefore as a subject with rights, which necessarily implies on the one hand, the recognition of its ability to influence the research process and on the other hand, the need to develop research relationships aware of methodological and ethical principles to promote and guarantee their rights.

From the analysis of the twelve master's theses, produced from a theoretical framework grounded in the sociology of childhood, we want to highlight, mainly the

epistemological, methodological and ethical issues, which are at stake in the research of the social worlds of childhood.

During the development of this research the authors were especially cautious in considering children as subjects of knowledge, and also the need to develop procedures that promote an effective listening of children’s voices and were respectful of their individuality and diversity, within the framework of a methodological reflexivity which refused an ethnocentric adult-focus perspective and highlight an hermeneutic and translation work between adults and children.

As we shall see in the twelve theses presented here, there is a wide diversity of views, voices and methodologies, which in our opinion, are not synonymous with disorder or methodological chaos, but should primarily be seen as a legitimate expression of the complexity and multidimensionality in the study of childhood and children.

It is important to refer that we do not intend to create a guide or manual of methodological and ethical procedures because it is not our goal "to unify knowledge and practices of adults and children in a totalitarianism of thought and/or *methodological totalitarianism*" (Tomás, 2007:33), but rather reflect on the difficulties in the research process and the strategies adopted to overcome them.

We present below a summary table of the objectives and methodologies used in the theses analyzed.

Table 2

Authors, Goals and Methodological Design used in the Master theses

Authors and Thesis Goals	Methodological Design
Susana Felgueiras - To characterize the representations that institutionalized children have about the right to family	Qualitative research - Case Study - Interview with children and adults - Drawings
Rute Paulino - Understanding the sociological impact of “Morangos com Açucar” with young children, examining how children reappropriate youth cultures in childhood	Qualitative research - Case Study - Interview with children - Drawings

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António Rosa - How do the students of Basic Education, characterized the evaluation process within the learning and skills considered in the classroom?	Qualitative research - Case Study - Semi-structured interviews - Focus group
Rosa Carmona - Map children's representations about the Environment and Environmental Rights	Qualitative research - Case Study - Task-based methods (Punch, 2002a) - Discussion and debate
Cristina Teixeira - Understanding and knowledge through the narratives of three mentally disable children how they experience and understand their rights	Qualitative research - Case Study - Observation - Semi directives interviews - Drawings - Work produced by children
Maria Inês Silva - Listen and characterize the speech of children on the issues of differences, from school context	Qualitative research of ethnographic inspiration -observation semi-structured interviews
António Primo – To characterize the attitudes, images and concepts that children of 2nd and 3rd cycle of an elementary school have about children with mental disabilities and deaf.	Qualitative research of ethnographic inspiration - Field diary - Observation -Interviews-talk
Vânia Nogueira - Understand / know and put into dialogue the meaning of the concept of participation for adults and children;	Qualitative research of ethnographic inspiration - Participant observation; - Group discussions with children - Interviews with teachers
Maria de Lurdes Sá - To characterize the practices of children in order to build their relations of friendship	Qualitative research of ethnographic inspiration - Interviews-talk with children; - Participant observation; - Drawings
Diana Mota - Understanding how children under twelve years are heard and participate in the processes of promotion and protection of their rights	Qualitative research - Interviews were adults have the responsibility of the process - Documental analysis
Teresa Graça - Consider the representations of children about what is seen as their place in family as a way of rethinking the relationship between the family and kindergarten	Qualitative research - Differentiated Methodology: - Ethnographic (direct, participant and non-structured observation). - Participatory (informal conversations with children;

	individual or collective records, interviewing parents, photographs)
Maria João Pereira - to know the representations of childhood and how do they experience childhood in a deprived neighborhood.	Qualitative research - Participatory - Individual and group interviews; - Photography; - Drawings; - Participant observation

The analysis of the master’s theses in regard to methodological choices, show us that there is a common indicator to all: all of them were developed under a qualitative paradigm. Within this methodology we can find different possibilities: the most representative were the case studies (5 thesis); the second most representative option were the ethnographic approaches (4 thesis); finally, with less impact the use of methodologies for documental analysis (one thesis), participatory methodologies (one theses) and several combined methodologies (one theses).

A very important aspect that we consider in the analysis of methods and techniques is related to the predominance of a methodological pluralism. As we know there is no one universally accepted role of children in research, we also know that there's no ideal methods or techniques to involve them in research, and for this the researcher has to ensure a permanent attitude of reflexivity in order to adjust the methods and techniques between the research participants.

In what concerns the research dynamics of the theses, we can state that they all used two or more techniques. Among them the use of interviews was the most frequent technique (9 theses), observation was the second (7 theses), drawings were the third (6 theses) and the focus group was the fourth (4 theses). Task-based methods (Punch, 2002a), the work produced by children (e.g. newspapers, children’s work exhibitions, book), documental and photographic analysis and interviews with adults were also used also in four cases and finally, other visual methods such as photography in two theses.



Ethical concerns

Discussions on ethics in research with children has been a strong point in the last decade, evolving from a lack of discussion to a fruitful discussion, which involves aspects ranging from the consideration of ethical principles and codes to be safeguarded, to more complex aspects as they are, for example, power relations and status that inevitably arise between adults and children and its implications in knowledge production.

About the first aspect Small (2001, *cit in* Gallagher, 2009: 13) argues that important as it is they "do not help us understand how ethical decisions are taken in specific contexts," given the diversity that arises from them. It will be necessary to develop a strategic set of ethical assumptions that allow the researcher to have the flexibility to meet the diverse circumstances that may find during the research.

About the second aspect, the issues of status and power are more complex, as we agree with Morrow and Richards when they state that "the biggest ethical challenge for researchers who work with children is the disparity in power and status between adults and children "(1996:98).

Research with children is influenced by issues of power and status in a more strong way than in other generational groups, as stated by Kirk (2007), who defends that usually adults take control of processes in relationships with children and young people, revealing the unequal power relations, which are replicated / duplicated in the research process (Morrow and Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002b). To minimize the impact of these unequal relationships it is essential to have an ethical and methodological caution for instance, in the possibility that children have to refuse their participation in the research, or the dropout of it or to give their own opinions and share experiences with adult researchers.

We need to consider that the relationships developed over the research processes depend on an extremely diverse set of factors, as are age and gender issues, children's experiences, their sociocultural background and in addition the research



questions and context, which are configured in a marked complexity of the dynamics and relationships of research.

The theses that we have been analyzing face some of the theoretical questions that we have been discussing in this paper, for instance, the fact that all the researchers explained the research goals to all the people involved in the process, in order to build a democratic ethics in research. It has been considered that children and adults involved in the research had to be informed about the goals and nature of research, methods, timing and results. By doing so we try to respect a fundamental ethical principle related to the informed consent of subjects.

We consider that these aspects are a contribution to build renewed ways of research based on more ethical relationships between adults and children, in Portugal, because, usually, this still remains a non-question.

Despite this caution, we must recognize that the issue of informed consent is a complex issue. In this regard Dingwall (1980) argues that it is essential to consider a consent hierarchy, a complexity of choices and situational constraints, codes of conduct involving certain mutual expectations, which require a constant reflexivity.

It's also important to consider that informed consent is a western legal concept, with a load of western assumptions about the ability to act (agency) and autonomy, sanctioned by western conceptions of rights (Tomás, 2007), which will not be able to embrace childhood's diversity. We consider Ferreira's proposal (2010) very useful, when she defends the replacement of the concept of informed consent by assent, as an "ongoing processes to obtain permission from the children in order of their *observability* be acceptable to them" (2010:176). One of the issues that the author raises has to do with getting the permission of small children and the (im) possibility of the researcher acknowledge whether or not it is given.

The master's thesis discussed the protocols, as well as the procedures, that were not fixed but were always subject to renegotiation, and consider children's, teachers and other adult's characteristics, and the contexts where the research was developed.



As stated Cocks (2006: 254-25) the sociology of childhood needs to rethink the concepts of "agency" and "competence", advocating the need to incorporate to these concepts, others such as incompetence, dependence, immaturity and incompleteness, that are inherent ontological ambiguity and necessary to understand some of the anxieties that arise in the researches. And in this regard we share the issues faced by some researches, namely those developed with disabled children (Silva, 2008; Primo, 2009; Teixeira, 2010). The main difficulties that arose are related with the question of children languages, namely children with autism, deaf or mentally disability and the difficulties that researchers faced in the explanation of the research goals and its intelligibility by children. Another difficulty arose from the translation of the meaning of their "voices", and the demand, from adults, to assure the real meaning of what children want to say.

The researchers have always tried to maintain research relations in a reflective and ongoing dialogue, between both children and adults who work with them (teachers and technicians) in order to overcome these difficulties and limitations. These difficulties ranged from issues such as the limited ways of speaking or other skills: on the one hand, children have limited oral competencies, and, on the other hand, they have other competencies that researcher doesn't have, such as the use of sign language (Primo, 2009).

In this research it was necessary to develop with the researcher an attitude of permanent deconstruction of pre-conceived ideas about these children, as well as the rejection of as a homogeneous, biological and medicalized concept of disability. It was also necessary to adopt ways of collaborative work with other adults (teachers, technicians and parents) and also with peer groups, which implied, as we mentioned previously, a methodological imagination, flexibility and openness to new ways of communicating with these children (computer use, observation, work done by children, the specific technical materials used, etc.).



The researcher's role

The research must take into account the role of children and adults in the analysis and review of the methods and research goals.

In the sociology of childhood it is consensual that subliminal forms of influence or co-optation of children in research must be eliminated and their participation must be promoted. However, it is important to consider the need to overcome issues like subversion, tokenism and control, namely, an idyllic or naive vision of lack of power and knowledge between researchers and children. One way to overcome these attitudes is to promote an ongoing and reflective and continuous negotiation and a permanent discussion of data.

An analysis of data from this confrontation can highlight some interesting nuances concerning the roles taken by adults and children in the process.

A first nuance has to do with the overlap of roles assumed by the researchers. The fact that a significant number of researches have been developed by teachers, which at that time had a dual role as researchers and teachers, placed some questions: can this overlapping of roles "increase" the tendency to assume adult-based positioning or bio-psychological paradigms about children? How did researchers solve these questions?

Some researchers opted not to conduct research with their class (Primo, 2009; Rose, 2009) considering that the dilemmas faced, mainly the issues under study, were too complex, opting to do so with other groups. However, others decided to take on this challenge. In the researchers developed by Carmona (2009) and Graça (2009), they explain the research goals to children, which were also their students, and the kind of participation that was expected from them.

In this regard and in a continuing effort to reflect on her status as educator and researcher Graça states that "I am pleased to note that the study I make is not confined to the role or to the danger that I feared. Even before I finish it, I find myself thinking about innovative ways of showing parents the unequivocal competencies of their children, a year after collecting all data for my research" (2009:66).

During data analysis and writing of the dissertation the author assumed a posture of constant reflexivity about her role and status and also about the difficulties that she would feel, to preserve the overlap of her role as kindergarten-teacher and researcher. This is an added value, for both Kindergarten teacher, and the researcher, but also for the children, to critically reflect and advance in the educational activity and in the construction of involved and insightful knowledge. The overlapping of roles is, thus, an added value and not a constraint, neither for the educational activity nor for the research with children.

Finally, and also concerning the ambiguity that surrounds the role of the researcher in an educational context, we present an episode experienced by Silva (2008), when she chooses to stay in the playground with the children and not join the group of adults, the teachers during the school recess.

"It was time for recess. They were all outside. The teacher called me for coffee in the teachers' room. I said I would not go because I wanted to be with children. I felt she found it strange." (Silva, 2008: 55)

As the researcher has chosen not to attend adult spaces at the school, she was not allowed to observe some classrooms where disabled children were. This episode demands to consider, in research with children, coherency and consistency with our ethical stance and the dynamics of research, and also to beware with the relationships with the adults involved, in order for them not to feel threatened in the performance of their duties but instead to understand the goals of research and feel involved.

A second nuance has to do with the protagonism assumed by children in the research process. Some researches (Graça, 2009; Pereira, 2011) were revealing dynamics similar to what Gallaguer & Gallacher (2008) defend, that it is not sufficient to carry out research *on* or *about* childhood. They state that "childhood researchers must research *for* and *with* children (...). It is no longer enough to simply reposition children as the *subjects* – rather than *objects* – of research; children should be engaged as *participants* in the research process, if not as *researchers* in themselves"



In Carmona's research (2008), children proposed her the performance of a range of activities, in addition to the interviews, about issues of environmental rights. Concerned with pollution that occurs near where they live, they suggested a field trip in which they took pictures and later made a book to offer the mayor. In Graça's research (2009), children suggest making interviews with parents and build with the researcher, an interview script to interview their parents. In Pereira's research (2011), children suggest and make a video documentary about what is a deprived neighbourhood and how they experience childhood in that place. In the three examples, the classic role of the researcher is challenged by the role that children play within the process, which translates into a remarkable richness in terms of knowledge production and significant recognition of different knowledge, both for researchers as for the children's.

A third nuance has to do with the role that the researcher assumes, compromised or not in the research, an aspect that is part of a broader discussion about whether science should be neutral or compromised / public (Santos, 2007).

In the analyzed theses, we highlight Silva (2008), Teixeira (2010) and Pereira (2011) work.

Silva (2008), considering the exclusion of children with ASD, has chosen to discuss these issues in the drafting of the thesis. At the end, a copy of the work was delivered to the school and the results were presented and discussed.

Teixeira (2010) was faced with the dilemma of the narratives of three girls, with moderate mental disability, which were systematically ignored, during years by adults, because they were children and disable. Due to continuous mistreatment (rape, starvation, food and health negligence, mother's murder), the researcher took some measures, namely: she decided to transcribe their narratives, even though they were hard to understand and not linear or consistent; she decided to use their "crude and detailed", language about these abuses; she began a search in order to find their close



family and finally, to contact the competent authorities, in order that some children's protection measures should be taken.

Pereira, in the course of research with children living in a deprived neighbourhood, made a methodological option in the sense that the research work would be, also, an intervention tool, taking as its starting point the children's active voices. The author states that "from their points of view it becomes possible to think of intervention in the neighbourhood, trying to bridge gaps and respond to needs, enhancing their quality of life by improving their life expectancies, increasing individual and collective skills, increasing self—esteem" (2011:34). She developed a collaborative work with children in order to make the identification of places and relationships that characterize life in the neighbourhood and to think with them some possibilities to improve the conditions of children's lives in contexts of exclusion.

In these theses the researchers assume a conception of science as objective and socially compromised and not neutral. They adopt a critical paradigm research, which sustains a concept of childhood as a historically constructed, as an oppressed social group and a "social condition" - as a group living special conditions of exclusion. From this point of view, a research work with children assumes itself as a tool in order to deal with risk threats, which limit the exercise of children's rights.

Final remarks

In the last decade, in Portugal, we witness to the emergence of a methodological and ethical new lexicon in the research with children, especially the research developed from the sociology of childhood. Through this paper we tried to present a set of ideas which support the methodological paradigm that argues that knowledge must also be built and shared with the children.

This paper, considering the dilemmas that arose in the researches, discusses three dimensions, that we consider fundamental in a research process: the need to adopt a reflective stance and permanent adoption of more flexible methodological designs; the need to critically reflect about the roles that adults and children can



assume in the research, trying to illustrate some possibilities of children's action in the research process, which, in our opinion, shows recognition and knowledge sharing between adults and children, and finally, the need to critically reflect about the kind of role, compromised or not, that the researcher can assume, during the research process, to protect the rights of children.

In our opinion the discussion of these aspects contributes to strengthen other ways of doing research about children's social and cultural worlds, which have been developed in recent years in Portugal and intend to, basically, build more genuine, democratic and ethical arenas in childhood through research.

This attempt, by itself, is already a counter-trend in light of what Becker called by reaction fetishistic (1967), ie, the tendency of some researchers and scientific paradigms sustain themselves on "old theories" that do not explain "new phenomena" (Soares *et al.*, 2006).

We consider that in this new century, some of the classic methodological ways to understand children are exhausted. It's fundamental that paradigms, methods, techniques and strategies should be redefined to reconfigure the knowledge that has been accumulating on children over the last century. Only through this way can we reach the view held by Santos (2007) that there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice.

In what concerns children's research, the proposal that we left here tries to express and to reaffirm the importance of involving children in the knowledge building about themselves and their worlds, recognizing alternative ways of thinking the research with children. Perhaps this is one of many possible paths to allow us to think of in a more democratic society and a more democratic science.

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